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19 February 1987**NEWS IN BRIEF****Iran-contra update****Senate panel clouds contra aid**

Washington

The Senate Foreign Relations Committee voted narrowly yesterday to halt aid to the Nicaraguan contras in the first major test of sentiment toward the rebels in the 100th Congress.

The vote sends to the Senate floor a bill that would cut off aid to the contras, while providing a package of \$300 million worth of new aid to other Central American nations, including Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Costa Rica.

Elsewhere on Capitol Hill, confirmation hearings continued for Robert Gates, President Reagan's nominee for director of the CIA. Mr. Gates came under renewed fire as Sen. Arlen Specter (R) of Pennsylvania accused him of trying to evade responsibility for misleading testimony that was presented to the Senate Intelligence Committee by former CIA Director Casey last year.

Senator Specter said Mr. Casey's testimony about the Iran-contra affair on Nov. 21 had been "skimpy, scanty, uninformative, and really misleading," and noted that Gates had directed preparation of the statement. Gates defended his action, saying the testimony prepared for Casey was "a fair statement of what we knew at the time."

In response to other questions, Gates attempted to quiet concerns he raised on Tuesday during his first day of hearings when he said the Iran deal was primarily a diplomatic initiative carried out by the National Security Council.

At the White House, Mr. Reagan met with Israeli Prime Minister Shamir. Both declined to answer reporters' questions about Iranian arms deal and prospects for a Mideast peace conference.

Mr. Shamir had separate sessions set for late afternoon with congressional leaders. The Senate and House select committees investigating the Iran-contra affair were to give the prime minister an informal briefing on the status of their inquiries.